

## Saving Tecmessa in Sophocles' *Ajax*

Sophocles' Tecmessa has received little attention among scholars over the years though Paul Woodruff sees her as an exemplary leader despite her lack of authority (Woodruff, 2011). Her powerful rhetoric and emotional intelligence influence the thoughts and emotions of those onstage with whom she converses, particularly the Chorus of Salaminian Sailors and Ajax himself. Tecmessa, I will argue, is able to educate the Salimian Sailors and Ajax in both the dynamics of emotional sensitivity and the proper object of one's empathy. But Sophocles nonetheless reveals the limits to such ideas of emotional identification and the actions that can be assumed in response to it. The particular role that Tecmessa represents as a concubine and the shifting definition of terms serve to undermine the communal and filial environment she attempts to establish, leaving her vulnerable and isolated, a mute but tragic figure.

Able to understand the vulnerability of Ajax and to articulate the proper response to his suffering, Tecmessa provides the on and offstage audiences alike with a deeper discussion of the emotional expectations of friends in her dialogue with the Chorus in the First Episode, putting before them the significance of sharing the emotional pain of a friend rather than rejoicing in his diminished madness: "If someone should present the choice, which would you choose: / distressing your friends while having pleasure yourself / or being pained in common about the same things along with them?" (265-268). Discovering the wisdom of her insight, they want to hear the story of his pain so that they can suffer with his misfortunes (285). Ajax too comes to agree that pity is the proper emotional response to the dreaded future Tecmessa envisions for her and their son, Eurysakes (646-653). Yet despite sharing emotionally in this vision of vulnerability with his pitiable concubine, Ajax does not go so far as to agree with what actions to

take in response to such emotions, choosing to save himself for death rather than for his family, repeating the vocabulary of safety ironically in his final words to Tecmessa (690-692). Finally, the Chorus becomes emotionally sensitive to Tecmessa's own grief at the discover of Ajax's body and they attempt to empathize with her, only to be reminded in a brief but significant few lines of the deep gulf that lies between the experience of a hero's sea companions and his female dependent (940-3). The *Ajax* then proves Tecmessa to be a tragic figure insomuch as she influences the emotional sensibilities of the men around her but fails to achieve the safety and resolution she seeks.

#### Work Cited

Woodruff, Paul. 2011. *The Ajax Dilemma: Justice, Fairness, and Rewards*. Oxford.